

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

December 18, 1998, Friday, PM cycle

Researchers preparing to start massive Smokies inventory

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SECTION: State and Regional

DATELINE: GATLINBURG, Tenn.

A hundred researchers and scientists can't wait to get into the woods to begin the biggest inventory of living creatures ever attempted.

They came from as far away as British Columbia and as near as the University of Tennessee to compare notes this week on the upcoming All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"We are going to try to educate the world about how important our natural resources are to the planet," said Mary Williams of Johnson City, president of the newly created non-profit support group **Discover Life in America**.

"Take pride in the gift you are about to give the world," she told the researchers Thursday as they concluded a three-day planning meeting.

The 810-square-mile park on the Tennessee-North Carolina border is considered to have some of the most diverse habitat in the world. Such a massive inventory project has never been done before.

It's estimated that only 8,000 to 9,000 of as many as 100,000 species of plants and animals that live in the Smokies have been cataloged.

"That means we have over 90 percent yet to even know if they exist in the park or not," said Michael Sharkey, an associate professor of entomology at the University of Kentucky who is developing an elaborate infrastructure of experts to identify creatures.

Before the project begins a full-fledged effort to collect specimen creatures, even the collection methods must be tested.

The first pilot sample-trapping will begin in March and is expected to continue through the summer.

"We hope to make all the mistakes and figure them out," said Keith Langdon, the Smokies' supervisory biologist.

It's not just a matter of finding the specimens and identifying them. Langdon said that would have little value for conservation planning.

So organizers also want to catalog creatures by their habitat and all the other species that live around them.

Beyond that work is developing links to the **Discover Life in America** Internet site - www.discoverlife.org - so the findings can be disseminated and a model created that could be used elsewhere.

Another major component is education that would involve both student volunteers and programs in public schools.

"The National Park Service for a long time has been very good at interpreting park resources but we haven't been always as good at integrating the science with education," said Christopher Stein, the Smokies' new interpreter.

He considers the inventory project a way "to help enlighten people about new ways of looking at life, and to even potentially modify their behavior to become devout stewards of the land."